

H.C. Burleigh Papers

Polson

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HISTORY OF THE POLSON FAMILY

On October 27th, 1874, Neil Currie Polson and Hannah Washburn McDowall were married in one of the tall, stone houses on Montreal Street - called "Victoria Terrace" - by the Rev. Patrick Gray of Chalmers Church. Their children were: Henrietta Washburn Polson, Jessie Currie Polson, Neil Currie Polson, Henry Gordon Polson, Stuart McDowall Polson, James Alexander Polson, Isabella Johnston Polson and Hannah Washburn Polson. Henry was called after Uncle Henry, who was a cadet at the Military Academy here at the time of his death - 1877. He was called after Grandfather's close friend, The Rev. Henry Gordon, the first minister of the Presbyterian Church in Gananoque. He was a writer to the Signet in Edinburgh; then decided to enter this church and came to Canada. Isabel is called after Father's Grandmother, who was a Lagavulin Johnston. The Lagavulin Johnstons made the White Horse Whisky for 200 years. They kept their sheep on the Island of Texas opposite Bowmore, under the supervision of three shepherds.

Father's Grandfather was Dr. Neil Currie of Bowmore, Islay and Ectafod, their country place. He was with the famous Dr. Montrose before he went to Islay - was noted for having set the first fracture. In those days, a severe fracture usually necessitated amputation. He visited the sick on horseback, followed by his man servant holding his medical case. While in cold weather he kept his hands in a muff. A story by Dr. MacGillivray, who was born in Mull, was that when Grandmother and Grandfather were dining at Islay House (Campbell of Islay, son of Duke of Argyle) - he was in full highland regalia - he was sent for and refused to go. Word came back shortly that Dr. Currie must come whether drunk or sober. On one occasion, a ship came ashore from Europe with passengers desperately ill with Typhus. The widest part of the Atlantic comes in on this 12 mile long big strand. Hygiene, as we understand it now, was very much in its infancy. However Dr. Currie gave strict instructions that no one could go near this ship without his permission and his household were kept at home busy making lint and soups and other helpful things. When

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some villagers got Typhus, they thought their revered doctor had special things for his family when they were not taken ill. Father often spoke of his nurse, Gillian, who sang to him old songs like "Tell me the tales that to me were so dear, Long, Long Ago". Her sons were distinguished publishers - the Sinclairs of Glasgow.

I hope that what I have written from memory and references from Dr. Canniff's history and Dr. Scadding's history of Toronto about the kind of people we call our ancestors, will interest this and possibly future generations of this family. I will begin with our first relatives on this continent.

THE WASHBURNS

The Washburns of America are linked with a long and honourable history over a period of seven hundred years of family continuity. Our particular interest begins when Mary Chilton, the first woman to step on the Plymouth Rock, 1620, so notable in the early Colonial history, became one of our most interesting ancestors. We trace through John Washburn and Rebecca Latham, whose son Joseph Washburn married Hannah, daughter of Robert and Susannah Winslow Latham. Their parents were John Winslow and Mary Chilton. Then on to Ebenezer Washburn, our great-great-grandfather, whose name was stricken from the Washburn historical books because he went over to the enemy, the British. His lands were confiscated. Ebenezer Washburn's wife was Sara DeForest - referred to as "The Beautiful Walloon." The family were related to the Ducal House of Hesse, but Mother did not care to speak of the relationship. However, they were Loyalists in the revolution, leaving behind them, when they came to Canada, very valuable properties. They brought some very fine furniture and a substantial fortune with them, which enabled them to build fine homes in Picton and the South Shore - also potash and grist mills in Picton, Demorestville and Washburn on the Rideau. People came long distances to have their grains ground. Ebenezer Washburn's government grant of land at Hallowell Township was one



thousand, one hundred and fifty acres of land. It is now Picton. The government grant for our great grandmother, Hannah Washburn, wife of the Rev. Robert McDowall, was a beautiful farm of six hundred acres at Sandhurst - on the Bay of Quinte. This land was inherited by Mother's Uncle Robert McDowall, who lived in Montreal. He had Mr. Clute look after the farm, which, after the lovely home was burned, was divided into three farms, the Phippen family owning the largest share. The Washburn's sons were educated privately and all three were lawyers. Stephen Washburn was Judge of the First Surrogate Court in Prince Edward County. Simon was a successful lawyer, member of the legislature in Little York, now Toronto, Clerk of the Peace and Senior Warden of St. James Cathedral. His name is with the Governors on the corner stone of the Cathedral and the sone in the old burying ground. He was also a pew holder from its commencement in 1818. Simon Washburn is described as having a very debonair manner, also as a bulky, prosperous lawyer whose home was at the intersection of Duke and St. George Streets in the Gore Vale section of old Toronto. He was the first man to wear a single eyeglass, an innovation in those days. Dr. Scadding has an amusing episode apropos to this in his history of Old Toronto. Mr. Washburn had had "The McNab" as young officer in the Courts. McNab tried by using his stirrup and strap waggishly as an eyeglass to annoy Mr. Washburn. Simon Washburn published the "Victoria Chronicle", one of the early newspapers in 1841. He sold it to Mr. Stephen Miles, a family connection, in 1849. (Miles' House was opposite the Penitentiary Gate).

Mrs. Washburn was a sister of Col. Fitzgibbon, Commanding Officer of the British Forces there. Their home was on Front Street. They lost four sons and a daughter in an accident. After Mr. Washburn's death, his wife accompanied Col. Fitzgibbon to England, when, after receiving Knighthood, he was retired as Custodian of the Tower in London, England.

Simon Washburn was one of 18 or 20 men guaranteeing various sums of money from £50 down, to build two bridges which were needed to give access to the peninsula. The Don was prominent even in those days and a necessity in brid-



ges made the private collection possible.

Mrs. Washburn was a fine horseman with distinguished dignity of bearing and Irish gaiety of manner.

Our Great Grandfather, Ebenezer Washburn, Esq., was on August 4th, 1804, listed as a member of the Legislature of Old Toronto (Little York) - member for Prince Edward County.

When scarlet fever carried off two daughters, the Rev. Robert and his servant man prepared the graves, and the religious service was prepared by the sorrowing father. Their only daughter, my Great Aunt (Carpenter), was a beautiful old lady - with side curls and book muslin widow's cap with tabs and ruching, and billowing widow's skirts. Fichu and Mourning brooch completed her dignified costume. She was what is euphoniouosly termed - a great lady. She was educated in Little York, where she stayed with her Uncle Simon and Mrs. Washburn, who was beautiful and had very distinguished bearing and Irish gaiety of manner. I listened, with interest, to her interesting stories and regret I did not listen more closely - they were historical times. She rode to Kingston on a wagon with her father, the Rev. Robert McDowall, at her side on horseback. When she neared the small communities on the way down the Bath Road, her furs were put aside so as not to excite any envy from those they met. She went to Toronto either by stage or sailing ship. She is buried in Fredericksburg. She married Mr. James Carpenter, an American. Her sons Robert and James were educated at Yale University. They took a trip around the World after graduating.

One of Ebenezer Washburn's daughters married a Murney. (Murney House, Corner King and Maitland Streets). Cousin Melissa Murney, of Picton had a lovely home there and at 60 married Mr. Wilson, of Port Hope, a publisher. Hannah Washburn married the Rev. Robert McDowall, and their home and land was at Fredericksburg. Her father brought furnishings from France and England - mirrors (one is in Isabel's drawing room), china, etc., and a Spode blue china breakfast, dinner and dessert service. It was beautiful, every piece with a



different picture, and used just as every day crockery by Mother's family. We have a few pieces to remind us of their family. The home burned and the final heir to the farm, Uncle Robert McDowall, lived in Montreal and had Mr. Clute run the farm. Mother's father, James A. McDowall, and his brothers, John and Robert, were sent to Mr. Workman's private school in Montreal. Grandfather was given property on Brock Street and Wellington Street and where Mr. Cooke's grocery is, and set up a business in furs. Later he lost his fortune by putting up very substantial sums for an army officer friend, and lost all.

The family then went up to the Washburn house, Demorestville, where the potash mill was, and remained there ^{until} Uncle James (Mother's brother) was ready for the University. Mr. Ackerman, one of Canada's finest artists in that day, came over from Picton to give them drawing and painting lessons. (Mr. Ackerman's pictures are in head office of the Bank of Montreal). Mother and her sisters had a fine education for those days. On their return to Kingston, they lived in one of those tall stone houses on William Street, and afterwards Victoria Terrace, one of the stone houses near the Armouries - Dr. MacLean's family, the Richmonds, Grandfather and the Urquharts lived there. They were considered very fine houses at that time. Just above them on Queen Street, Grandmother McDowall's Uncle, with whom she lived until she married Grandfather, was Archibald Cameron Macdonell, first Collector of Customs in Kingston.

I will go back to the Rev. Robert McDowall, who was the son of a retired British officer and his wife, Sara Fraham of Dumfri^reshire. Their home was near Saratoga and Ballston Spa. Mother said the Battle of Saratoga was fought in their land. Grandfather McDowall was born July 25th, 1767, educated at Williams College and one of the very earliest students of the Union Theological Seminary, Schenectady, New York. Cousin Robert made the trip, usually made by Americans of wealth, around the world. He sent Mother a bolt of Lyons velvet, and the Canton china we have is part of the gifts at that time. He married



Miss Ellen Furbish of Portland, Maine (Cousin Nellie), a beautiful woman. Cousin Robert with Mark Hopkins were partners in building railways in France and elsewhere (at the time of the Franco-Prussian War). He became a very successful man. They had a country house at Tarrytown, N.Y., where Mother visited them - lived in Kensington, London, England and Weimar in Germany, and were very anxious for Mother to live with them, but there was Father to be considered, and Neil C. Polson at this time enters the picture.

Cousin James Carpenter was a lawyer in Cobourg, and lost his life in the MacKenzie River. His desire for an adventurous life in comparison with the humdrum legal atmosphere of a small town, was his undoing. His wife went to live in Torquay, England.

The Furbish Family were the Lumber people - now known as Brown & Company. With reference to the register kept by the Rev. Robert McDowall, from 1800 to 1836, (is now in Queen's University library), there are 1,131 entries in all, a cherished historical record in the Queen's Canadian. He was ordained by the Albany Presbytery of the Dutch Reformed Church and sent by the Classis of Albany to the Bay of Quinte District in 1798. The Presbyterians petitioned the Church of Scotland to send them a minister and a schoolmaster. Either the fountainhead of the Church was not alert to its opportunity or else unable to comply with its request. So the Loyalists, with Major Vanalstine as their spokesman, petitioned the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Rev. Robert McDowall was the response to the request. He was formally inducted as minister of the United Churches of Fredericksburg, Adolphustown and Ernestown, but his main work was really that of a missionary at large. (Founder of Ernestown School). He and Dr. Bethune, of Montreal, divided the work between them. Dr. Bethune's parish extended from Montreal to Brockville; Grandfather's from Brockville to London, where he watered his horse in the Thames River. From Gananoque to Newmarket are Churches which he founded. The connection with the Dutch Reformed Church lasted until the War of 1812. Reluctantly, as funds from the



American Church were not forthcoming, he valiantly organized the "Presbytery of the Church of the Canadas". He organized or, in some way, was part of every Presbyterian Church then. He was made First Moderator in Cornwall, Ontario, in 1818, and identified himself with the Canadian Branch of the Church of Scotland. (Was the founder of the Presbyterian Church in Canada - See Tablet in Convocation Hall). Two years later he was elected First Moderator of the Canadian Church and First Synod of the Canadas. The Family Compact, which the Washburns and other politically minded people were part of, was waging a losing fight to maintain special rights and privileges. He was deeply distressed by the rebellion of 1837, but in his personal life he had apparently long since found how to resolve many conflicts of the times. He worked incessantly to provide Presbyterians, in his country, with religious facilities comparable to those already enjoyed by members of the Church of England. Meanwhile he married into the Family Compact. His wife was Hannah Washburn, daughter of U.E.L. Ebenezer Washburn, who was member of Prince Edward County, and who received a grant of 1,150 acres in Hallowell, Prince Edward County. Ebenezer Washburn was one of the early wardens of St. George's Cathedral. One brother-in-law, Daniel Washburn, a lawyer, married a daughter of Sheriff McLean and she and her two children are buried in St. Paul's Churchyard. (The Old McLean House was opposite Tete due Pont Barracks). He went to New York, where, with his brother John, a minister, he was creating a new form of church work which got him into trouble with the Church. He founded the "Five Points Mission," the beginning of Social Service Work among the sailors and outcasts of lower New York. He founded this home for the friendless, which grew into the great building and work in Morningside Heights. The Committee kept in touch with Grandmother McDowall, who received their paper "The Guardian" all her life. I believe they have a portrait of him in the building. Henry had his life story, which was very interesting and informative. He (Uncle John McDowall) prayed every day for his Mother, "whom he said was very worldly," liking the material and social side of life better than the spiritual. As she was brought



up in very gentle ways, she found it difficult to adjust herself to a Sabbath without any cooking or special preparation for meals. Everything had to be prepared the day before.

During these early days, the sacrament of marriage was solemnized only by clergy of the Church of England, and when the Rev. Robert McDowall came, he brought the rite of baptism and marriage to the people in scattered places where there were no religious services at all. His brother-in-law, Daniel Washburn, Esquire, a lawyer, was among the few men who finally acquired the land on which to build St. Andrew's Church, and was Secretary of the Kingston Presbyterian Society. They asked the Government for an acre of unappropriated land for the church parsonage and burial place, and to be secured by a deed thereof. This was the 13th of October, 1817. Mr. Washburn was directed to transmit the amount of the fee of the deal thereof. In 1820 the corner stone was laid. In 1821 the Rev. John Barclay was ordained minister of the church - he was engaged to Mother's Aunt Isabel Macdairmid, who died after a brief illness, and Mr. Barclay died a few years later, incumbent of St. Andrew's pulpit. His monument is in Frontenac Park, which was the portion of St. Andrew's burial ground. Mr. Barclay lived in the brick house at the side of Queen Street Church, Kingston. He had very unpleasant times with Dr. Stuart, who thought he had the sole rite to baptism, marriage and burial services - Mr. Barclay deemed that right - as by the Act of Union Scotland Law and rights of the Church were maintained in Great Britain. His claim was approved and ministers of the Presbyterian Church in Canada were privileged to carry out the offices of the church.

In 1844 the disruptions of the Church in Scotland, had the same repercussions here. A Committee, of which Grandfather, James A. McDowall, was one of the twelve, moved to organize a free church here in Kingston. Two new Presbyterian Churches were formed - Chalmers and Cookes. Mother was one of the first to be baptised in the new congregation. The Mowats, Carruthers, Matthews and



Gunns were among the twelve. So we are now coming to the advent of the Polson Family.

Reference: Dr. Scadding's History of Toronto
Dr. Canniff's History of the Loyalists

Dr. Bethune's son was Dean of Montreal and after Coadjutor Bishop to Dr. Strachan, Bishop of Ontario; both Presbyterians originally. Dr. Bethune is buried in Willimatown. The Washburns played an active part in church, state and press - Cataraqui Bridge, Commissioner of Roads.

Grandfather McDowall married Henrietta Catherine Mary Macdiarmid, daughter of Lt. Donald Macdiarmid and Anna Macdonell, daughter of Capt. Hugh Macdonell of Williamstown, Glengarry. Lt. Macdiarmid was a graduate of Edinburgh University, who defended Fort Wellington at Prescott. The Glengarry Macdonells were loyal Highland Catholics, many of whom came to Canada and were really the main spring of the famous Fencibles. There were three branches of the family - Aberchalder, Collacheia and Leek. Our macdonells (spelled with the one "n") were of the Aberchalder branch. Grandmother's Grandfather was Macdonell of Ossian Hall, Williamstown, Glengarry. His nephew was the famous Bishop McDonell of Kingston, who baptized Grandmother Macdiarmid, and was equally at home in war or peace in church. Another interesting far away cousin was called Spanish John. I regret to say that our copy of the book - A Fascinating Story of an Adventurous Soldier - was borrowed or lost.

Grandmother McDonell's Grandmother was a Cameron. In that way they were brought up in the Presbyterian Church in Williamstown. While the Camerons seem a far away generation to us, we looked forward to Hugh Cameron's visits when he was here with the troops, and while I was young. I knew and remember Miss Mary Cameron and her sister when I visited with Etta at Dr. McLaren's at Lancaster.

Duncan Cameron's history is so interdsting, I will relate it here - "Duncan Cameron was the son of Alex. Cameron of Glen Nevis, Scotland, and his wife Margaret MacDonell. He was born at Glen Nevis Moristen, in Scotland, coming to New York with his parents and party on the "Pearl" in 1773. His father was



given 1000 acres under Sir William Johnston and enlisted during the Rebellion, as a Private in the Royal Yorkers, and served in that Corps until the end of the war. Duncan Cameron's papers are very interesting. His Nipigon journal and sketches are in Queen's University library. Sir Roderick and Grandma were first cousins once removed. Grandma went to Glengarry every summer and kept in close touch with her cousins - The MacPhersons, Frasers, Camerons, McLarens and MacDonells. We, Etta, my sister, and I were in Lancaster in 1890. While we were pretty young, we were entertained as adults at Cousin Henrietta's granddaughters and saw some very interesting, old homes. Among them, at Cousin Alex. McDonell's, Ossian Hall, where the magnificent Cameron sideboard and silver were. Mrs. McDonell refused either to give or to sell to Sir Roderick the Cameron silver and other treasures. The sideboard was very beautiful. Sir Roderick's wife was a Miss Tiffany of New York. Duncan Cameron represented Glengarry from 1824 to 1828. He is referred to in Dr. Scadding's History of Toronto. He was one of the Treasurers of the Fund in St. James Cathedral (in) Toronto - while there was a member of the Cathedral. In 1784, at the age of 29, he entered the service of the North West Fur Company in the Nipigon Department - later Proprietor, in charge at Winnipeg, in 1807, Rainy River in 1814; took charge of the Red River Department, and had to deal with the Establishment of the Selkirk Colony, in charge of Miles McDonell (Scotia), another family connection. When the Hudson Bay Company attacked Fort Gebralter, he was taken prisoner and sent to England for trial. He was released and collected damages from the Hudson Bay Company for false imprisonment. Returning to Williamstown in 1820, he married Miss McLeod, daughter of Captain McLeod of Martintown. One of his sons was Sir Roderick Cameron who established a shipping firm between New York and Australia. Sir Roderick kept in touch with Grandma McDowall. When Henry went to New York, he wrote Grandma he would like his kinsmen to come and see him at his country house on Staten Island. "Sir Roderick Cameron is buried in Williamstown. His Tomb was unveiled by Col. Stanley."

near Burlington

H. C. Burleigh papers

Palmer

